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The Yahoo Returns

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TOURISTS WHO SWARM about Washington this raw April often discover a curiosity that government clerks who pass by every day never notice. The Washington Monument from its base up to the 153-foot mark is a whiter shade than the rest of the shaft.

This is a scar of the fury of a yahooism that lies under the American crust, and is with us today in a bizarre band of crackpots, bullies and retired colonels called the John Birch Society.

The Washington Monument was blighted in 1854 by the "Know Nothing" movement, a secret, violently anti-foreign group which elected governors in seven states, had a large membership in Congress and enrolled President Millard Fillmore. The name came from the members' pledge to do exactly as they were told and reply, "I know nothing," to all inquiries, thus giving an historical precedent for the Fifth Amendment Communists and Teamsters of today.

The monument was being constructed by individual subscription and by gifts from friendly nations. Greece, for example, sent a block of white marble from the ruins of the Parthenon. The Vatican gave a marble block from the Temple of Concord. One winter night, a masked band of "Know Nothings" broke into a shed on the monument grounds, seized what they called "that marble block from Rome" and dumped it in the river.

The "Know Nothings" also grabbed the records of the Monument Society and threw out its of-

ficers, declaring themselves the only true patriots who knew how to preserve George Washington. This stopped the Washington Monument. For nearly a quarter century, the monument to the Father of America stood like a broken sword. When work was resumed, the builders were unable to duplicate exactly the shade of Maryland marble in the base.

The "Know Nothings" were not the first or the last of the organized yahoos in our history. In the gay 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan spread across the country, and particularly into the Midwest; it was essentially anti-foreign, anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish. Its greatest power was in Indiana, where organizers became wealthy, and the KKK controlled the Statehouse, the Congressional delegation and membership in country clubs, extorted tribute from stores, and was destroyed only when its leader was involved in the vile death of a Statehouse stenographer. As a child in Indianapolis, I can remember great parades of hooded Klansmen filling the main street, and fiery crosses burning on the lawns of Catholics, Jews and dissenters. (The John Birch Society was founded in Indianapolis.)

A decade later, Father Coughlin, the radio priest, stirred such a frenzy of hate against the New Deal that the Catholic Church quietly took away his microphone. He was followed by Gerald L. K. Smith and others who preached a brand of home-town fascism. Then, only a few years ago, as unlikely looking a leader as ever slouched on the Ameri-

can scene, Joe McCarthy, turned feelings into an imitation of Hitler's mass hysteria.

The fellow who falls for all this is the yahoo. He is a poor devil who burns with rage at fate for having cheated him; he hasn't the mind or knowledge or courage to figure out the cause of his misery, and is ready to believe a fiendish conspiracy is at work against him. Down in the back hills of Kentucky, they believe the Pope directs this conspiracy. The red neck in the South blames "bad niggers" and "nigger lovers." In the paneled board rooms, it is Walter Reuther.

The yahoo rarely limits his fears and hates; it inevitably spreads to cover all who are unlike him or frustrate him, so that he finally trusts only 100 per cent Aryans who are, at the same time, hard shell Protestants, Taft Republicans (or Byrd Democrats), and who swear eternal damnation on labor unions, modern education and every President of the United States since Herbert Hoover. Studies during and since the McCarthy era estimate that about 10 per cent of the American population are potential yahoos, susceptible to the waves of inspired hate.

The yahoo is an awful sucker; he is exploited by politicians, organizers who know how to make a buck collecting dues and donations for good works, and, occasionally, by religious fanatics. In return for the tremendous amount of emotional energy the yahoo puts into his labor, he gets nothing but high blood pressure, and the chance to pistol whip a Negro